



TUTOR TIPS

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OUT OF THE BOX: STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING FOR ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES.

Author Diane Stickler.

The key to designing useful and engaging resources for people with disabilities is simple- know your student and take the time to create resources that are eminently suited to his or her needs.

As teachers and tutors of adult literacy students, we already recognise that a student-centred approach is crucial to the success of adult learning. The same applies in learning contexts where our learner has a disability. We must start by identifying the specific needs and aspirations of the individual, and use this information to guide our development of the learning program, including resources.

What is "disability"?

According to the World Health Organisation, "disability" is any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being. In educational terms, "disability" refers to a person's moderate to severe reduced capacity in the areas of communication, social integration and learning. These conditions imply that a high level of support is often required to facilitate the student's participation in learning.

Our students may have a variety of disabilities, making it impossible to characterise a "typical" adult learner who has a disability. Even people with the same disability may not experience its impact in exactly the same way. There are, however, some sound guidelines for developing learning programs and resources for people with special needs:

- View each student as a unique individual with his or her own strengths as well as weaknesses. It is important that we discover and acknowledge the learner's **strengths**, as well as the more obvious weaknesses that caused them to seek our assistance in the first place. Recognition of what the student **can** do is a key to encouraging him or her to 'have a go' at more challenging learning tasks.

- **Self esteem** is frequently an enormous issue for learners with disabilities, so that opportunities for early success are vital. Most activities may be 'scaffolded', so that the student is highly supported initially, and encouraged to develop towards greater independence once he or she becomes more familiar with the task. It is important to remember that the timetable is set by the student- he or she is not ready to progress until he or she **feels** ready. The teacher/tutor's impatience or frustration at modest rates of progress is counterproductive, and can destroy any gains the student made in previous sessions.
- Like any other adult learner, a person with a disability is far from a 'clean slate' at the commencement of the tutoring program. He or she will bring a range of knowledge and life experiences to the task. Take time to get to know your student's individual **preferences** and motivation for attending sessions. A student-centred approach, with topics negotiated by teacher/tutor and student, has a greater chance of succeeding than does a 'set' curriculum. Our concern is the specific needs of the individual. If the student has difficulty expressing his or her wishes, a parent or support worker might help to relay this information.
- Ascertain the student's starting **level of competence** in literacy and numeracy by conducting an initial assessment. Often, this will be the task of the teacher or tutor coordinator, who will then discuss the result with you. To begin, set tasks just below the student's assessed level, and then just above it as he or she gains confidence and begins to make progress.



- Recognise that many people with disabilities may be reluctant to take **risks**, especially in group learning contexts. Red pen marking must be banished from tutoring sessions, due to the extremely negative connotations of school failure that may attach to it. Overcorrection should likewise be avoided. Instead, focus on just one or two errors, or a selection that reflects the misapplication of a single spelling or grammatical rule. For example, the spelling errors 'shuld' and 'culd' (for 'should' and 'could') count as one error, since they both involve the dropping of the (somewhat redundant) 'o'. Affirm to the student that the error is easily fixed by remembering to use the 'o' in words that follow the pattern, and reinforce with a rhyming game to further establish correct usage.
- Students with disabilities may become frustrated and angry at their own **rate of progress**, or lack of it. Positive affirmation is necessary. Try to work with your student to set realistic goals, and to provide the optimum level of support so that he or she gains a sense of moving forward. Providing false praise is a risky business, but there is usually some aspect of the session in which the student really did perform well, or made progress, and we need to acknowledge this fact. Encourage the student to self-evaluate, or to participate in peer evaluations if the opportunity arises.
- Your student's progress may be quite **modest**, and might not always follow predictable patterns. It could also be difficult to quantify. There is a danger in using numerical scores as the sole marker of progress,



because many students compare their own performance across tests, even if the tasks have no relation to each other. As students attempt more difficult tasks, they may score lower on tests than in previous sessions. Some interpret this as tantamount to failure. Teachers and tutors need to work very hard to ensure this negative washback doesn't happen.

- In **evaluating** your student's progress, look for qualitative indicators. You may observe that your student is now taking a greater role in deciding the topic of each session- one student with an intellectual disability requested that he and his tutor read the final book in the *Harry Potter* series, because he had followed the story in film and was impatient to see how it ended (as were most of us!). Tutor and student took turns in reading, discussing plot developments and making predictions about what might come next. This willingness to attempt new and challenging tasks is a clear indication that the student had made progress.
- As much as possible, make use of real-life materials that are **relevant and meaningful** to the learner. In the adult literacy field, there is a relative lack of quality, age-appropriate material for use with learners. This is, in fact, not a limitation, but a strength. By creating our own resources, we are able to more effectively respond to our student's specialised needs. Strive to plan and design tasks that clearly relate to your learner's goals, and are presented in contexts familiar to him or her. Even formal sessions concerning spelling and grammatical rules are far more effective when real-life, contextualised examples are used. This can be as simple as presenting a series of related sentence that tell a story, rather than a similar number of unrelated, randomly-selected examples. Themed approaches are also excellent, since the topic itself may energise the student and encourage him or her to

become involved in planned activities.

- You may need to **modify or adapt** real-life tasks so they are more suited to the student's level, especially in the early stages of learning. Try not to overload your student with information. However, too much modification can cancel out the benefits of using realistic materials. Remind yourself of what it is you are trying to achieve. Generally speaking, we are in the business of opening access doors to the world of human communication- that is, the real world. We need, then, to simulate as closely as possible the communication tasks our students are likely to encounter, so that they can practise the skills required and gain confidence in their ability to participate. Try using only the more relevant parts of documents rather than the complete version, and enlarge the sample for ease of reading and to accommodate your student's responses if his or her writing is large. This is particularly helpful with form-filling tasks. By attacking one piece at a time, the task remains a fair simulation of the real one, and allows gradual development of the full skills range required to complete the overall task.
- Use **Language Experience Approach** to encourage your student to become involved in learning. Begin with familiar activities and topics (personal recounts are a good starting point) and gradually progress to less familiar and more challenging tasks. This way, your student can develop the confidence to move outside his or her comfort zone. Imagine the consequences of going about it the other way around!

Here is an example of a student's personal recount:

"Every Tuesday and Thursday I go to my swimming lessons at _____ Pool. I wear my Speedos and cap and goggles. I practise using flippers and a kickboard. I like doing freestyle and breaststroke the best. My class is from 9 o'clock until about 11.30. Then I have my Vegemite sandwiches and a can of Coke. I would really love to be in the Special Olympics, but I have to work very hard, and you need a lot of money. The Olympics will be in China and then the next one will be in London. I have been to Ireland already for soccer."

The topic of the story was suggested by the student, and the tutor asked questions to fill in the gaps. The tutor wrote the story in large print (upper and lower case) with double-line spacing.

The tutor then read the passage at a little slower than normal speed, pointing to each word as it was said. For the next reading the tutor and student read together, with the student saying the words aloud just after the tutor. This was followed by the tutor's reading as far as a particular word and stopping, signalling that the student was required to supply the word (eg "*I wear my _____*"). Since the story was the student's own, he had no problem identifying "*Speedos*" as the missing word. The last stage of the process is, of course, for the student to be able to complete the reading independently, but this may or may not occur on the same day.

- Use personal recounts as the **basis for further learning**. Once the student's interest in swimming, the Olympics and overseas travel is revealed, these topics may become a means of engaging him or her in ensuing sessions. The day will no doubt come when the student tires of this same theme, though, and we need to be wary of overworking a good idea. The arbiter of what is relevant and engaging is, still, the student.
- Use **concrete** examples to demonstrate points. People with disabilities often experience difficulty in processing abstract information, in the absence of tangible, real-life examples. They do tend to respond well to highly visual and kinaesthetic learning modes, and they generally prefer to be 'doing' rather than 'sitting around talking about it'. Repetition is also extremely important, to ensure that learning has 'stuck' and may then be transferred to new situations. This takes considerable time and patience on your part.
- Have a **"contingency toolbox"** of alternative activities if the one you have chosen for the session falls flat, proves too difficult, or is

accomplished too quickly. Don't be afraid to finish early if the student's mind is not on the job during the session. Recognise that people with disabilities may have difficulty focussing on tasks past a certain point, and may continue to grapple with critical thinking tasks that are taken for granted by other learners.

- Often, people with disabilities have limited experience in the use of basic **study techniques and memory tricks**. This creates a 'double disability', where both the knowledge and the processes of acquiring it are not accessible to the learner. As teachers and tutors, we need to remind ourselves that critical thinking is an integral part of literacy skilling- the 'core skills' of listening, speaking, reading and writing are all modes for constructing and evaluating meanings. Use open questioning techniques- who, what, where, when, how and why- to encourage your student to test out more critically-attuned thought patterns.
- It is important not to get too hung up on reading and writing in literacy sessions. Some learners with disabilities view reading and writing as quite irrelevant. One student wrote his name beautifully under the watchful eye of his tutor, and enjoyed the praise this earned him. The moment the tutor looked away, however, he decided to make his work of art even better by placing swirls and lines all over, under and between the letters he had written. What a mess! It was obvious that, to this student, writing represented a random set of marks on paper, and nothing more. Reading tasks met a similar reaction. Better to focus on the more **relevant skills** of listening and speaking than to belabour the point.
- Some people with disabilities are heavily reliant on praise and positive affirmation from tutors and other extrinsic sources, making them extremely eager to please others. In this scenario, we can never be sure if the student is not participating just to make us happy. Ironically, tutors find this situation quite taxing. Try to encourage a more **internal locus** by asking the student to self evaluate ("*So what do you think you did really well today?*"). Another strategy is to use the phrase "*You*



must be very proud of yourself", rather than "*I am proud of you*" when giving feedback.

- Don't forget that, just like anyone else, people with disabilities love having **fun**, and tend to have a great appreciation of the humorous side of life. You may wish to include jokes and riddles in your warm-down toolkit, or to encourage the retelling of an entertaining anecdote or film review. Regardless of its source, humour is extremely important, and should not be overlooked in the 'serious' endeavour of learning.
- Make use of **game-based activities** in your sessions. There are many excellent CD-ROMs that are specifically designed for teenage or young adult learners, and the BBC's Skillswise site is still a winner. For the construction of word search and other puzzles, Discovery School's Puzzlemaker is an excellent resource. Board and card games such as Scrabble, Pictionary, Guess Who and Uno are also valuable in their literacy focus and their power to engage learners.

Here are examples of resources developed for a learner with a disability. Since her goal was to gain her learner's permit, this became the theme of the tutoring sessions:

> Reading

At Queensland Transport, you need to show documents that prove who you are. Look at the list and place a circle around the documents you are allowed to use as proof of your identity:

- | | | |
|---------------|------------------|------------------------|
| 18 + Card | Note from Parent | Full Birth Certificate |
| Medicare Card | Passport | Phone Card |
| Library Card | DSP Card | Credit/ Debit Card |

> Writing

Write your personal details:

LAST NAME.....

GIVEN NAMES.....DATE OF BIRTH.....

ADDRESS.....

.....

TELEPHONE.....

EYE COLOUR.....HEIGHT.....

HAIR COLOUR.....COMPLEXION.....

SIGNATURE.....DATE.....

> Speaking & Listening

The student was interested in the issue of driving while under the influence of drugs, and the testing procedures used by police to identify 'drug drivers'. The tutor downloaded the relevant information from the Queensland Transport website (http://www.transport.qld.gov.au/resources/file/Pdf_drug_driving_fact_sheet_nov_07.pdf). The tutor read the information aloud, then tutor and student participated in a discussion of their reactions to the material. Based on this discussion, the tutor recorded the following recount:

"The government is getting serious about stopping people from taking drugs and then driving. The test is on a sample of saliva from your mouth. It is for ecstasy, ice and marijuana. If you are caught, you lose your licence and have to pay a big fine (\$1050) and you are suspended. Drugs act like alcohol when you are driving. Even legal drugs you get at the chemist can affect how you drive. I want to keep my licence when I get it."

Every written recount provides an opportunity for verbal interaction between tutor and student. These interactions are often undervalued beside the more 'concrete' literacies of reading and writing, but are equally important. They help sustain the thematic link between tasks, and assist the student in discovering and practising appropriate modes of interacting.

> Numeracy

(This activity is designed to increase the student's awareness of space and judgement of distances, by using approximations and body metrics.)

Tasks:

Spread your hands to show how far a metre is.

Try to guess the length and width of this room. Now stand up and pace out both distances. What are your best guesses? Now measure the actual distances.

Roughly how long and wide is a car? Use tape to measure the length and width of a sample car.

How long is two seconds (for following distance)? Count two seconds and see how accurate you are. (Use 1000, 2000 technique).

What is an example of something that is 50 metres/ 100 metres in length? (swimming pool, football field).

All times and distances have some relevance to Queensland road rules (http://www.transport.qld.gov.au/Home/Licensing/Learn_to_drive/Your_keys_to_driving_in_queensland/).

> Critical Thinking

Shift 2nd Gear is an excellent CD ROM resource from NRMA Motoring and Services. It recreates an accident as it occurred, from the perspectives of those involved, several eyewitnesses, paramedics and the police officers who arrive at the scene. It challenges the learner to examine all the evidence and decide who is to blame for the incident. The resource may be downloaded free from the NRMA website, <http://sites.mynrma.com.au/shift/nrmashift/>. It also provides an excellent base for further discussion.

References

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